

FITCH TALKS FUTURE OF EDUCATION



Gregory Fitch

Mike Woodard

Gregory Fitch, the executive director of the Alabama Commission on Higher Education, ACHE, spoke in Tuscaloosa last week. Greg spoke about the need to balance education of technical nature,

for workforce development, with education aimed toward research.

"It's not enough to have a technically trained workforce. We also have to have top flight engineers researching the next improvement in products to maintain our competitive position in the world" Greg said of this balance in technical and research level education.

Greg spoke of the need for seamless and continuous education from pre-K to grade 20...PHD. He said we have to have data about students, organized in such a fashion to derive actionable decisions from it. Greg said Alabama is one of only 6 states in the union that has this data formulated on students, right now, which will enable him, and the State of Alabama to make these decisions about the future.

I listened to Greg for a while, but then I asked him a question which noticeably perked his interest. "What about the future?" I asked. "What can you with the educational system in Alabama to make it work better, cheaper, and faster?" I followed up before his answer.

Gregory Fitch's eyes lit up! "We're going to change the way students go to school", he replied. Now he had my interest up. Now, mind you Gregory is a

single solitary man he may be in a position of authority at the state level, dealing with universities and community colleges, and the entire educational system, but he has to have the "system" go along with that. if he has his way a lot is going to change, and from where I see it for the better.

In the future, under Greg's plan, a student going to say, mechanics school at Shelton State. They would clock into class like clocking onto a job. If they get injured or ill, lose their funding, or whatever, and it forces them to stop going to class they don't get an F at the end of the semester they've bought that class and they get to finish it in the future, as needed, as possible. They just start back to class to use up their hours they purchased for education later.

One step further. Let's say this student is real smart, or studies day and night, or already knows a lot about the subject all along over the course of that class or curriculum he can take challenge exams to move forward. Greg gave an example of a man wanting to get a degree in applied science in diesel mechanics. Typically this requires 1800 hours to complete. But if a man CAN finish the course and pass the required exams after only 1200 hours of classroom instruction then he'll get the degree sooner. He's ready for work. If he had to stay in that course the additional time he might have become bored, he might of quit due to other events occurring in his life, after the 1200 hours, and not be able to finish the other 600 hours that he didn't need to be going to class anyway.

This would save our government money on education (that's our tax dollars), that would make it easier for smarter or hard working students to get

out of this system quicker, freeing it up for new students. All in all...it's one of the smartest ideas I've heard in a long time.

In my experience reporting about education, I seldom have heard the idea of...let's make education simpler, quicker, cheaper, more efficient, from our educational system. I usually hear the same drone tone...."We need more funding" (wonder if Dr. Witt is reading?). You'd think that funding for education made students want to learn faster. You'd think that more funding motivates a teacher (not any real good teachers I've ever known). I know funding makes the world go round...but I've never seen it make a great teacher out of a poor one. I've never seen increased funding motivate a true "help and care about the students" minded professor or teacher. I doubt I ever will.

To hear Gregory Fitch tell it... there is a better way, and he's going to find it. Greg is working on finding a way to keep students interested so the system doesn't lose their interest between grades 9 and 12...where the majority of students do lose interest. Gregory wasn't the most interesting, inspirational, or motivating speaker when telling about the current state of education in the State of Alabama. But, when he and I talked, one on one, about the future, about where the educational systems in Alabama can go, and he turned into a human dynamo. This man has some profound plans.

It reminded me of a Dr. Seuss book, "Oh The Places You'll Go". If Gregory Fitch gets free hands, State of Alabama education is in good hands, and it's going to go somewhere new and exciting.

*e-mail Mike at
mike@tuscaloosa-shopper.com*